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ABSTRACT

Perhaps two million or more people in the United States have experienced mental or emotional problems, have been treated and returned to the community, and want their lives to be as normal as possible. Unfortunately, these people often face insurmountable obstacles in finding a job, largely because of public and employer ignorance or prejudice toward them. The purpose of this pamphlet is to take a look at these people, at their advantages as potential employees as well as their shortcomings, and to give employers answers to questions that they frequently ask concerning mentally restored individuals and their ability to work. The following eight questions are considered from an employer's point of view: (1) Who are the mentally restored? (2) Can mentally restored persons succeed? (3) What kinds of work are they suited for? (4) Will I have the problem of rapid turnover? (5) How will mentally restored workers affect my other employees? (6) Are mentally restored persons unpredictable and dangerous? (7) Will my taxes be affected? (8) Will my health and disability insurance costs go up? These questions are answered with facts in a manner meant to be reassuring to employers and to point out the benefits of hiring mentally restored persons. (KC)

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National Institute of Mental Health

EIGHT QUESTIONS EMPLOYERS ASK ABOUT HIRING THE MENTALLY RESTORED

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FOREWORD

"Why should I hire mentally restored people?"

Because of the growing efforts on behalf of former mental patients, this question is being asked increasingly by America's businessmen.

At the National Institute of Mental Health we are deeply involved in these efforts. We are stimulating research by the mental health establishment into the stigma of mental illness; we are working on a blueprint for a national plan for the chronically mentally ill to provide an integrated range of services for all people who in the past were able to get inappropriate services or none at all. Our Community Support Programs are active in improving community acceptance, housing, and access to services.

One of the main ingredients of success in this area is the dignity provided by work. The facts in this publication illustrate dramatically that many persons who have the desire and the ability to work are denied the opportunity because of discrimination—even unintentional, as it often is— against a condition over which they have had no control.

I feel, as do my colleagues in mental health, that this situation can be changed, and I think that with your understanding and cooperation the change will be accelerated.

Herbert Pardes, M.D.
Director
National Institute of Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

There are people in the United States—no one really knows how many, but guesses range as high as 2 million or more—who have experienced mental or emotional problems, who have been treated and returned to the community, and who want their lives to be as normal as possible.

For many—perhaps most—of them, "normal" includes joining or rejoining the work force, but they are facing many difficulties in their attempts to do so.

There are estimates that the number of unemployed persons with histories of psychiatric inpatient treatment is between 70-85 percent of the total. In other words, unemployment is an all-too-familiar fact of life for former mental patients.

The effect on many of them is little short of devastating. In a work-oriented society, unemployment, especially if it continues over a period of months or even years, is damaging to any willing and able person. It forces that person to live on the meager allotments of public welfare payments, and it eliminates the social and other normalizing aspects of work.

But what has this to do with you, as an employer?

It has often been said, "People who have suffered from mental illness and emotional problems are different." Of course they are different from most of us, but so is a person who has had a heart attack, who has had a major operation, who has had a long illness.

In applying for most jobs, however, the person who has suffered physically is considered equally along with other applicants, and the person most suited in qualifications and experience is the person hired.

But those "unfortunate" enough to have mental or emotional problems in their histories are different enough to be placed in a category of their own, and they become victims of discrimination.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to take a look at these people, at their advantages as potential employees as well as their shortcomings, and to give you as an employer answers to questions that many of you frequently ask concerning mentally restored individuals and their ability to work.

THE FIRST QUESTION IS FOR YOU

The first question we should consider is not one that is asked by employers. Rather, it is one to be asked of an employer such as you: If there is a large and growing pool of workers who are eager for jobs and who can do a good day's work and if you as an employer have jobs in your business in which you find employee dissatisfaction and a great deal of turnover when you hire people from newspaper advertising or from referral by employment agencies, shouldn't you investigate that pool of workers?

Most of the people about whom we are asking are available to you. They are people who have sometimes spent months or years in treatment for their mental disabilities and have been pronounced ready to take up their lives in the community again. While many of them have little work experience, they are able to do entry-level jobs and to stay at those jobs.

They are people who have had some sort of vocational training as part of their discharge from treatment or as preparation following their return home. Some have worked with vocational counselors, and in many States these counselors are prepared to offer them continuing support. In many areas there are also programs to assist former patients in finding jobs and to cooperate with employers in making sure that the transition into work is a successful one for both employee and employer.

QUESTIONS EMPLOYERS ASK

The questions employers ask about the mentally restored are numerous and varied, ranging across the areas of both mental health and employment.

First, let us look at these questions together in a list, and then let us consider each of them individually.

The questions:

Who are the mentally restored?

Can mentally restored persons succeed?

What kinds of work are they suited for?

Will I have the problem of rapid turnover?

How will mentally restored workers affect my other employees?

Are mentally restored persons unpredictable and dangerous?

Will my taxes be affected?

Will my health and disability insurance costs go up?

These questions are among those frequently asked, according to businessmen who employ mentally restored persons and who provide answers for other potential employers interested in hiring these workers.

WHO ARE THE MENTALLY RESTORED?

They are people who have suffered disabling mental problems who have improved through treatment, and who have been "restored" to their communities.

There are many terms for the people we are discussing—"former mental patients," "mentally rehabilitated," "mentally restored," and others. Just as the term "mentally ill" defies pat definitions, so do terms for recovered patients.

For purposes of this pamphlet, we use the term "mentally restored" because of the meaning it has both for the persons themselves and for you as an employer.

Mentally restored means those persons who have suffered disabling mental or emotional problems, who through treatment of some kind have been "restored" to the community, who have the desire to find and maintain employment.

Two examples will serve to demonstrate the wide range of people covered by the term, "mentally restored."

An accountant for an industrial corporation suffered a mental break on the job, making it necessary for him to spend a few weeks in the psychiatric inpatient unit of the general hospital in his hometown. After the episode, he was able to return to his position in the accounting department.

A woman, who had spent more than 30 years in an institution, was discharged as a part of an accelerating national movement to release those patients who were found to be able to function in the community. The woman joined a rehabilitation club which helped place her with a manufacturing firm.

Both of these people had been mentally ill—he acutely and she chronically—but when they returned to the community they joined the ranks of the mentally restored.

Each of them was affected by a national movement of hospital releases. In the middle 1950s, the population of State and county mental hospitals was estimated at more than 700,000. During the two and a half decades that followed, the number dwindled to well under 200,000.

She was returned to the community because she no longer needed treatment in the hospital; he stayed in the community because the practice today is to allow the community to participate in the recovery of mental patients.

Many who have been treated, either in mental hospitals or in general hospitals, have a need for continuing therapeutic support of some kind. But that need does not eliminate their abilities, or more importantly, their desires to work. Work, in fact, is often an integral part of their recovery.

Between the two extremes shown here, there are many variations. Large numbers of the mentally restored are not as fortunate as these two people: They are unable to find work, primarily because of their histories of mental illness.

CAN MENTALLY RESTORED PERSONS SUCCEED?

Experience shows they are equal to other workers—and perhaps are better in motivation, attendance, and punctuality.

Evidence is growing that mentally restored persons, when placed in appropriate job situations, are equal to other workers.

Where there is some support for the mentally restored, such as a transitional employment program or a good vocational rehabilitation program, employers have found they have altogether satisfactory work records.

One manufacturing plant executive, who has a number of years of experience in hiring the mentally restored, said that in several areas they are better than the average employee.

"In the area of attendance—I definitely think they are better. Absenteeism is much less of a problem for them. And, their motivation, I think is better."

But he also expressed a thought all employers should keep in mind when they consider using people with handicaps: In order to place their clients, some counselors overpromise, saying the clients are job ready, when they are not, or saying they are able to perform at levels they cannot attain.

Employers should have realistic expectations. "I also think that, as employers, we only have the right to expect and demand performance that is equal to the average," he said. "Now, in many cases, we get better. If we get less, we'll drop the individual, just as we would anybody else."

But the important thing is that this worker "has the right to fail just as anyone else does. And if we don't allow him to have that right, he's not living in a real world. I wouldn't want to

mislead other employers to feel they have a right to expect some kind of 'super' performance on a job."

Thus, residents of the world of the mentally restored are similar to the rest of the population. They have their strengths, they have their weaknesses, as we all do. In many cases involving work, there are some advantages. Not always, but more often than not, mentally restored persons have preparation for the job—from some sort of vocational program—that is in their favor.

The point here for you as an employer is that, in many of the jobs you have to offer, the mentally restored present risks similar to those of most other job applicants. If you adopt a policy that says an applicant will not be dropped from consideration simply because that person has a history of mental illness, you can then proceed to assess all candidates on the merits of personal qualities and abilities.

WHAT KINDS OF WORK ARE THEY SUITED FOR?

The mentally restored can work at all levels. Most are limited only by a lack of opportunity.

The kinds of work the mentally restored can do are limited only by talents, abilities, experience, determination, and the opportunities they are given by the employment community.

The accountant we spoke of earlier was able to return to his job when his psychiatric episode was over. He had the

necessary factors working for him—his previous record was good, and he had an employer who understood and accepted his situation. The employer understood that the illness was debilitating only for its duration.

Others of the mentally restored, similar to the accountant, have records of success at work, at all levels of professionalism. But they have difficulties in returning to work. For many employers, their talents, abilities, and experience do not outweigh the fact of illness.

The woman, too, was fortunate because—although she had no previous work record—there was a program of rehabilitation and placement which, coupled with an accepting employer, led her into an entry-level job.

By far the larger number of the mentally restored are in the same group with the woman. These people are termed "chronically mentally ill." They spent long years in institutions—in some instances only because they had no place to go, not necessarily because they needed long-term treatment.

Many of the chronically mentally ill who have been discharged to the community have no established work records because they may have been hospitalized when they were in school or college or before they could find jobs, but they are eager to make their way into the work force through entry-level positions.

With training and continued support, they can become producing members of the work force.

But people from both groups—those with good work records and those with none—can work. To gain their proper places in society, they all need the dignity that work affords. And they all need the opportunity to take advantage of one of the most normalizing agents in the lives of all adults—job satisfaction.

Perhaps these considerations may encourage you to reassess your own hiring policies and practices. If you have positions available at any level—particularly those in which you have seen expensive turnovers because of lack of interest and resulting absenteeism—you may find it profitable to investigate this labor pool.

WILL I HAVE THE PROBLEM OF RAPID TURNOVER?

When the job and the employee are properly matched, turnover is reduced to a minimum, effecting savings for the employer.

In some instances, as you well know, turnover is almost a function of the type of job. Employers have found, as mentioned earlier, that the mentally restored who receive some outside support are equal to or occasionally better on the job than those who have never required treatment for an emotional disturbance.

The mentally restored are dedicated to making successes of their lives, and a lengthening work record adds to their success. With mentally restored employees, turnover may be reduced, in some cases dramatically.

Here again, there is no effort to whitewash, to promise more to employers than they can realistically expect. But overall, the risk attendant to mentally restored employees is little greater than with anyone else; often it is less.

The restaurant industry, for example, has found that employees classified as "handicapped," including the mentally restored, have a much better record than "normal" employees. In jobs in which turnover is as much as 300 percent annually, the first group's record is no more than 44 percent.

Other industries have had similar experiences. The lack of turnover provides employers savings in help-wanted advertising expenses, payments to employment agencies, and training costs.

Perhaps the most important point to remember is one of the simple tenets of good management: Success comes when the employee and the job to be done are properly matched.

HOW WILL MENTALLY RESTORED WORKERS AFFECT MY OTHER EMPLOYEES?

Other employees will find that the mentally restored usually are hard to distinguish from their co-workers. Working together brings understanding and acceptance.

This question is among the most frequently asked by employers who have had no contact with the mentally restored.

A food service operator in New York City felt this concern strongly when he first agreed to use the mentally restored in his establishment.

"I really didn't know what to expect," he said later. "I had visions of an ambulance driving up to the door to discharge six or seven people in straitjackets. They would be let out to do their work, be taken to lunch, and then be put back in their jackets at the end of the day."

He soon realized his fears were unfounded, and, if he had not known who the mentally restored persons were, he would have been unable to distinguish them from his other employees.

Another employer in an area where there had been resistance to the opening of a group home for the mentally restored commented that people in his plant who worked alongside the former patients were among the community leaders in getting the home established. It happened because the two groups worked profitably together on the job, and the long-time employees came to understand that their mentally restored colleagues were people with the same needs as everyone else, particularly a home.

These are two examples of the value of personal contacts in helping to relieve or banish the fears of most people. Fears of the unknown are dissipated by familiarity.

In some organizations, the buddy system helps in the process of transition. A veteran member of the work force takes charge of the new employee and teaches work rules and procedures. The educational process, of course, becomes a two-way street, each learning about the other. A number of unions have used the buddy system with other kinds of handicapped persons, and some unions are beginning a similar system for the mentally restored.

This all boils down to a need for a normalizing process that is equally necessary and beneficial to both the mentally restored employees and their associates.

ARE MENTALLY RESTORED PERSONS UNPREDICTABLE AND DANGEROUS?

They are similar to the rest of us. Behavior of the mentally restored shows little difference from the general population.

An East Coast employer of the mentally restored said he has trouble answering this question when other prospective employers call him before committing themselves to this labor source.

"People have said to me, 'If we hire the mentally restored, I assume that some will go berserk on the job. How do you handle the danger that they will probably hurt themselves or their co-workers and damage machinery?'

"That question shows some of the horrendous ideas some people have—but the fact is, employers are no different from

the general population. This is how the mentally restored are viewed.

"But my answer may be a hard one to believe: In all our years of working with the mentally restored we have not had one incident of this sort."

This employer's experience may not be typical, but the fact is that the mentally restored are comparable to the general population when it comes to unpredictable or dangerous behavior. For example, it has been said that the rate of violent crime perpetrated by the mentally ill is approximately equal to the rate for the general public.

Another employer said, "We have people whom we have hired on our own who seem more disoriented from the world than our mentally restored workers."

This statement is, of course, extreme, but usually there is little untoward behavior among the mentally restored—any such reason for refusing to hire them is not a valid one.

WILL MY HEALTH AND DISABILITY INSURANCE COSTS GO UP?

You will get health insurance at standard rates and your use of disability insurance is comparable for the mentally restored and their co-workers.

Many employers have said, "I cannot hire the mentally restored—my insurance will not allow me to."

Not true, according to a San Francisco businessman who uses a number of mentally restored persons in his organization. "Insurance companies say they would not think of telling an employer whom to hire. Since these companies do not track the disabled, there are no figures on the effects of hiring the mentally restored, but employers who apply for hospitalization insurance get it at standard rates."

In addition, experience has shown that there is little or no abuse of disability insurance. Another employer, who has more than 3 years of experience in working with the mentally restored, pointed to but one injury in the first 2 years, saying, "I would have to say that is a low, low percentage."

He added that "any prospective employer who is doing well protects himself by having the proper insurance, by having the proper safety committees, safety programs, safety literature. We are firm believers in this."

It works for this employer and for many others.

Another experienced employer said:

"Other employers who are beginning to look into this source of labor raise all the questions—worker's compensation, increase in cost of benefits across the board, employee morale, productivity, everything that an employer would be interested in. My answers are all positive."

WILL MY TAXES BE AFFECTED?

You will find they will not increase. Rather, you have an opportunity to lower them through targeted job tax credits.

There are two sides to this question. The first side supposes a negative connotation—"Will my taxes be increased when I hire the mentally restored?" The answer is resounding: not at all. The employers who have been quoted here all attest to that fact.

They say that existing tax forms may be complicated but that they deal primarily with figures concerning profits, losses, income, depreciation, and the like. The forms ask only about the numbers of employees, not who the employees are. Whether mentally restored people are included on the work rolls therefore is not a consideration.

The second side is one that can have a positive effect on those taxes, but it is one that few employers take advantage of.

Public Law 95-600 says that, for any tax year beginning after December 31, 1978, an employer can receive a tax credit of 50 percent (up to $3,000) for the first year of employment of a handicapped person, and 25 percent (up to $1,500) for the second year.

For each qualified disabled individual employed by corporations or by individuals who own their own businesses, these salary amounts can be credited against business taxes due the Federal Government.

A "qualified individual" is anyone who has a physical or mental disability that constitutes or results in a substantial handicap to employment and who has been referred to the

employer through a State vocational rehabilitation agency or other certified training program.

One large corporation realized savings of more than $500,000 in 6 months by using the tax credit; smaller companies, too, have benefited. Thus, the law is a positive advantage for you, one that you will find well worth exploring.

IN CONCLUSION. . .

We have seen that for the job applicant with a history of mental illness the prospects for employment are bleak.

One reason for this circumstance is the fact of mental illness itself. Unfortunately, even those who experience only brief episodes of emotional upset and hospitalization find that, despite their quick return to health, they face many changes: Family status, friendship patterns, financial circumstances, and even living arrangements may be altogether different.

However brief the episode, it may well result in a tarnished reputation and lowered expectations for career advancement. It all too often results in a lost job.

Persons who have been seriously or chronically mentally ill face still more difficult problems—a loss of capacity to function independently, brought on by long-term hospitalization; a change in thinking processes and even personal appearance, caused by side-effects from years of medication; and problems of finding any kind of work, intensified in many cases by the lack of a work history.

Another problem is the reactions of most people to the mentally ill and to the mentally restored. The perception is that mentally restored people are different, and consequently they are discriminated against—they become victims of stigma.

The President's Commission on Mental Health, in recent national studies of the situation, found that stigma was one of the greatest problems facing those who are or have been mentally ill. Members of the Commission reasoned that

forcefully calling the attention of the public to the problem can go a long way toward its solution.

Employers of course are members of the public, and many of them—purely for reasons of good economics and good business—have begun to stimulate a change for the better. They are finding that persons with histories of mental illness are good workers and definite assets to the firms which employ them. They are beginning to form a mutually profitable partnership.

We think you will find this true for your own business. The avenues open to you for investigating this large labor pool are many.

Your local vocational rehabilitation office, the State employment office, the mental health association, the community mental health center in your city or county, and other agencies are available to you.

If you need assistance in locating these resources, you can write to Partnership, Public Inquiries, National Institute of Mental Health, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Md. 20857.

One employer summed up the situation this way:

"Our business found that hiring the mentally restored makes dollars and sense."

Perhaps it will for you, too.

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